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BY RUPERT HUGHES

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Miss 318 and Mr. 37.

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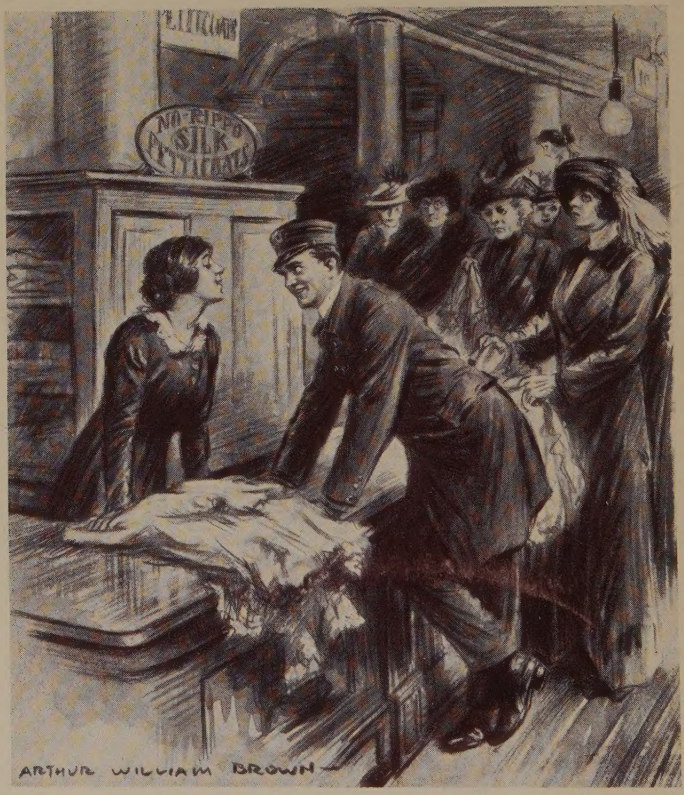

"Kiddo, the only thing I like in this store is—you" (See page 78)

MISS 318 and MR. 37

By

RUPERT HUGHES

Author of "Miss 318"

New York Chicago Toronto

Fleming H. Revell Company

London and Edinburgh

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FLEMING H. REVELL COMPANY

New York: 158 Fifth Avenue
Chicago: 125 North Wabash Ave.
Toronto: 25 Richmond Street, W.
London: 21 Paternoster Square
Edinburgh: 100 Princes Street

To
Whom It May Concern

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I

THE RED MENACE

THE name she called herself (in the back of that head of hers, with its strange derangement of hair outside and the stranger dreams inside) was Madum'selle Lisette Monet. The name her parents called her (in the back of the tenement, with the week's wash outside and the large family inside) was Lizzie Mooney. But she was called "318" in the Mammoth department store, which was named "The Mammoth," because the proprietors, Messrs. Hirschberg and Poswalsky, felt that it was easier for the public to remember that name than theirs.

The days were still short and this morning was yet dark, but Miss 318 was already at her post. And so were the four thousand other employees on the Mammoth pay-roll. And yet the enormous bazar seemed filled with solitude. The scattered clerks only emphasized the vacuity. Hundreds of salesmen and sales-

women were on hand, but there were no buy-men or purchase-women. The big doors were still closed against the advance guard of the morning army, mustered by the bargain-bugle and already falling in line on the walk outside, and pondering the lavish displays the window-dressers had compiled during the night.

Against the onslaught of these Amazons, bent on loot and pillage, everybody in the Mammoth was making ready, from buyers' assistants and transfer men to packers, bin-boys, and drivers and the stokers in the boiler rooms.

Lisette Mooney's somewhat youthless hands were condensing the stock that had been dumped on her counter. They fluttered about the chaos of silken things darting here and there like humming-birds among flowers. She was making her wares as alluring as possible and as "get-at-able"; for once the enemy arrived, the action must be brisk.

Just back of her and a little above her, Constance, the change girl, sat aloft in a little parapet. She also was at work like a besieged chatelaine getting her ammunition handy. Soon she would be plied with money and merchandise from all directions, and she must

load money and sale-slips into cartridges, shoot them at the distant cashier, make up the bundles, receive back a shrapnel of change, and pass it down to the grasping hands below.

Tongues fluttered as fast as fingers at that hour, for each girl was her own newspaper. Constance had spent her evening at home with her parents—to her great regret. There were no head-lines in her past yet a while. She must live on borrowed excitement—but she was still young. She turned to Lisette for gossip:

"Was you goin' to a show last night, Lisette, when I seen you pass our window all diked up so elegant?"

"Umm-humm!" came the answer darkly through a mouthful of pins.

"Vawd'vul or the movies?"

The pins came out: "Movin' pitchers?—Me! I was took to a genuine theaytre."

"Ah, go on!"

"I hope to die!"

"Who was the dub you was with?"

"Me brother."

"Oh, parding me!"

"You're entirely welcome. When we passed you, he ast me who was the rag I spoke to."

"Is that so!"

There was silence for a while. Constance was properly insulted at being referred to as a "rag," and she strove to devise some appropriate retort. But all her inspirations lacked the cutting edge, so she substituted a languorous and contemptuous tone of patronage from behind a yawn.

"Could you see good from the nigger-heaven?"

Lisette shrugged off the impeachment: "Nigger-heaven! We was down-stairs with the high-boys."

"Ah, go on!"

"Hope to ——"

"Since when's your brother had a job?"

"He ain't."

"Then where'd he get the price to buy?"

"Who said he bought? Me other brother's a scene pusher—just joined the Onion; so we went in on velvet as guests of the management." Lisette said this in the manner in which she imagined a Duchess would inform a Marquisess that she had just been chuting the chutes with the King.

Constance' body leaned over and stared

down, but her spirit was gazing upward in awe of such glory.

"For the love of Mike!—say, Lisette! D'you s'pose your brother could get me a coupla comps? He's a nawful nice fella—d'you s'pose he could?—huh?—do you or don't you?—or whattaya think?"

Lisette was pleased to be proud above pride. She sniffed: "Anybody can get comps to that show, Constunss. Me brother says he spends more time durin' the day paperin' the house than he does shovin' the flats at night."

"Paperin' the house every day! Ah, go on! What'd they wanta put fresh wall paper on every day for?"

"You ain't wise to the theat'ical language, Constunss. This ain't wall paper, it's seat paper—it means fillin' the unsold chairs with deadheads. It's like our shoe department keeps the empty boxes on the shelves so's it looks like we got a big stock."

Constance shook her head meekly over the wonders of human ingenuity and human privilege: "I was astin' you whether you thought your brother could slip me a pair of passes."

"Take it from me, Constunss, you don't

want 'em. Of all the punk shows that was ever gave, that one is the woist."

"But I'd love any show I could get a pass to. I've always wanted to know what comps feel like."

"Believe *me*, Constunss ——"

But Constance would not be denied: "It couldn't be any worse than settin' 'round home every evenin' and hearin' Mor and Por jor over the dollar he held out on her when he got his pay last week, or that two dollars she spent on a spring hat two years ago. See if you can't pull down a coupla comps, won't you?"

Lisette yielded amiably: "Sure I will, Constunss, if it's as bad as that. They'll be glad to have you. You'll fill a seat as full as anybody. And, say, Constunss, whatya think? I had a floitation with the fireman."

"The fireman? Was they a fire?"

Lisette gasped at such ignorance: "Constunss, you're posutuvly illitrut. There's always a fireman on the job at theaytres."

"What's a fireman doin' without a fire?"

"That's the idea. He's just standin' around to nab it in the bud and keep the cattle from stampedin' if they sniff a passin' cigaroot."

"Is that so? Say, he must have a swell job —seein' a show every night and gettin' paid for it!"

"Well, that depends on the show. Seein' the same show about steen times in concussion —and that show of all shows—must get on his noives sumpum awful. I guess he oins his pay all right, all right. But him and I had a little talk. It set me to thinkin' we otta have a few firemen here in this store."

"We got firemen."

"Oh, I don't mean those disguised ribbon-cloiks that draws their pay from the foim and don't dast criticize the least thing. I bet we'd be safer without 'em. Last week in the cleanin' and repairin' department—didn't somebody get gay with a match in the neighbourhood of a bunch of nap'tha, and didn't it scorch the whole room before the confla—the con—well, the fire could be distinguished?"

"Did it? Was they? I didn't hear about it."

"Of course you didn't; our fire crew squinched the flame and everybody was swore to sekercy."

"For he'm's sake! Well, anyway, you admit our crew put it out by theirselves."

"That's the woist of it. They didn't toin in any alarm. Everything's gotta be kept on the Q. T. for fear it would hoit business. But suppose that fire had got past our crew. This old buildin' of ours is nothin' but a package of invitations to a fire. It's that few minutes' start that does the business. Look at the blaze that made a fiery foinace out of the Equittable fireproof palace. It starts in the basement from a cigarette or sumpum, and they think they've got it out, and all the while old Mr. Fire is sneakin' up the elevator shaft and gettin' busy on the seventh floor. If that hadn't 'a' broke out in the oily mornin', a regiment of people would 'a' went up in smoke."

The glow of Constance' faith in the firm was being snuffed, but her loyalty made a last rally:

"Well, if the place did start, we got fire drills, ain't we?"

"Oh, Constunss, don't make me laugh—I got a chapped lip on me. Those there fire-drills is funnier than anythin' they had in the play last night. And then who's drillin' the mobs that soiculate 'round here all day? Do you suppose the Uninted States Army could stop those bargain-buzzards once they broke loose?"

"Well, anyway, look at the ottermatic sprinklers we got everywhere on the ceiling."

"Ottermatic sprinklers! Don't you suppose they'd start a panic all by theirselves! You know any woman would rather lose her life than wet her hat or her skoit. These dames ain't moimaids. Most of 'em wouldn't even go in the water in a bathin'-suit. Can you see 'em if these sprinklers started to spray? They'd all rush for the way out and nobody knows it. If they all started at once—say, do you know how many people there are in this store at any one time?"

"Quite some few."

"Quite some few, is it? On our last annivoisary day, when they had the real bargain sale, there was nearly a hunderd thousand rode up in the elevators. Sometimes there's twenty-fi' thousand people under this roof at once. Do you get me? Twenty-fi' thousand! And this ain't one of the biggest stores. It ain't as moderen and up to date as some of the new ones. It's a fire-trap and so reco'nized by such as knows. And, yet, we have brang as many as twenty-fi' thousand humans in here at once. Can you see 'em in a fire panic, chokin' the

elevators and rollin' down the stairs in a human Niagara Falls?"

"Well, ain't we got fire-escapes?"

"Yes, but where?"

"Oh, back there somewhere."

"Where is somewhere?"

"I don't know exackly."

"But you gotta know such things exackly when the fire gets after you. Did you ever stop to ummagine what this place would look like if a real blaze got a good start?"

"No, and I don't wanta."

II

THE HEAD OF THE OSTRICH

CONSTANCE was very human in being intensely afraid of terror. Horse-like, she would rather run away from a dangerous possibility than investigate it. So long as she wore blinders she jogged along comfortably; if the blinders were shaken off, she hastened to put them on again herself.

A worldly-wiser soul might have said: "The result of a fire here would be so appalling that I ought to take counsel as to its possibility and the best way to escape it."

Constance did not think along those lines. The thought of a fire turned her heart over in her little chest, so she restored her pulse to normal by banishing the thought that disturbed it.

But Lisette had a curiosity that would not be quelled; it was not morbid but constructive. She was all for examining dangers and projecting them into the future. It was the imagination of consequences that had kept her a good

woman in a seethe of temptations with the undertow of poverty tugging at her weary feet. She had a heart famished for romance, but she wanted even that to be on the level; she wanted to know whither it led. She could detect the ulterior motive under the most innocent looking courtesy, and she took forethought even in love. She was a wise virgin; and she felt that she could only be either by being also the other.

So the matter of danger in her place of employment was one she thought of incessantly; not with cowardice, but with caution. She knew the exits and the entrances as she knew the whereabouts of the merchandise. She was haughty and insolent with the customers unless they comported themselves to her liking, but her success as a saleswoman was her defense before her employers. She kept her job because she needed the money, and from a haughty feeling that where other women could work she would work. She would risk the danger, but she would not pretend to remove it by ignoring it.

This morning the theme of fire was unusually alive in her mind. She wanted to think

about it. She did most of her thinking aloud, and thought best when she had another mind to whet her wits upon.

"Believe me, Constunss," she said, "a goil makes a mistake in not figgerin' things out. The ostrich has fine feathers, but it's the foolest boid there is because it pokes its snoot in the sand and says, 'Thank Gawd, I'm safe here.' You got a right to have a map of this store in your mind. You may not need a fire-escape once in a thousand years, but when you need it, you need it awful bad. Now, listen to me and I'll tell you where you're at. If this place should catch fire ——"

At this moment, a young girl of swart mien and poorer than the usual attire, even of the shop girls, was passing with an armload of doilies from the stock room. At the word "fire" she dropped her scattering cargo. She bent to pick it up, with more shame and confusion than the mishap seemed to warrant.

Lisette's back was turned to her, for Lisette was preaching up at Constance in the pulpit, and she did not see the frantic scramble the girl made to gather her disjected freight. Lisette was pointing out to Constance the ex-

act whereabouts of the fire-escape behind a mask of shelves and wardrobes that obscured the window. She did not notice that the swarthy girl, having reassembled her burden, was lingering, leaning against the counter and following Lisette's pointing fingers with a gaze that seemed to be trying to make notes and remember.

Lisette was saying:

"You gotta know your way about, Constunss. You gotta get it in your system so you could go to it in the dark. And you gotta keep your head on your shoulders if you're goin' to keep it very long. Look at that fire in the factory where they made shoit-waists—nearly a hundred and fifty goils lost their lives. And that was a fire-proof building. And it's still standing. The goils would be alive, too, if they hadn't been such rattle-brains——"

"Oh, don't say that. Oh, don't say that!"

Lisette whirled at the surprise of this wailing protest and stared at the newcomer.

"Was you addressing me?" she demanded.

"Yes. You should not to speak so cruel about those poor people which did died. They are not what you do call them."

"Whatta you know about it?" "I was in it"

"Whatta you know about it?"

"I was in it."

"You was!"

A doleful nod was the answer. Constance hung far out from her balcony, and Lisette leaned across the counter to stare at this mysterious veteran of such historic adventure.

"Say, listen!—tell us about it," Lisette whispered.

"I do not like to speaking of it."

"Ah, go on!"

The ox-eyed girl, with a cattle soul accustomed to obey anybody and everybody, meekly accepted the command of this hungry curiosity. But she made ready to speak with effort, as if to lift a great burden. Cold flames swept through her, and she shivered so that she must grip the counter to keep from toppling off the stool.

Lisette watched her with dismay a moment, then put out her hand.

"Don't talk about it if it hoits you. I'm sorry I ast you."

"No, I wish to speak now. It was so tairrible I want you should to have seempat'y weet those gerl who die. They work so hard for so

little. They cannot choosse where they should work for they must live, and now they are—they do not live more. My sister and me, we——"

A gong shrilled through the building with a brazen ague. Almost mechanically the whole force came to attention. The girl seized her doilies and fled. Constance and Lisette began prinking their hair, straightening their aprons and making a few last dabs at everything.

III

A ROMANTIC ENCOUNTER

THE store had opened. The crowd came in slowly, but steadily, and dispersed itself like a tide marching up an estuary and deploying across a seaweedy shore, losing itself here and there and gathering in pools otherwhere. And the shuffle of all the feet had the sound of the incoming tide when it reaches shale and fumbles it, paws it, hesitates about it like a doubtful bargain-hunter.

But Lisette did not see the crowds with eyes for metaphor. They were plain reality to her, hatefully hard to please, and deadly daily.

"Listen at 'em, Constunss! Ain't they beauts?—the advance guard of battle-axes. They all believe that the oily boid catches the woim. Some of them is soitan'y boids, but I wisht I could loin 'em that I'm no woim. Just look at 'em come! Don't you just loathe and nauseate 'em?

"Listen at their feet—cattle crossin' a bridge, and every hoof in a shoe that was built for

somebody else. See 'em dribble through those there revolvin' doors."

"It grinds 'em out like a coffee-grinder, don't it?" said Constance.

"Sausage-grinder, you mean," sniffed Lisette, "for they're mostly pork. Look at 'em all jammin' in the same trough at once; two fat dames tryin' to squeeze in one compartment, and they're so busy toinin' round to roast each other, they've got the thing stuck. There's the door-man takin' the wheel and buntin' 'em in.

"Oh, Lord, the day's woik has began wunst again. Well, anyways, they didn't wish any bargain-counter on me to-day."

The mob fell first on the best advertised fabrics, most of which were specially displayed in little extra booths set in the aisles as closely as the push-carts of an East Side market. Round these the life-blood of the store's prosperity coagulated.

Yet a while Lisette's counter was ignored save for an occasional passer-by who stopped and glanced over the tempting mounds of silk with expressions of disdain that thinly disguised the pitiful longing. A few women, plainly too poor to buy gorgeous petticoats of the sort

Lisette was offering to-day, paused, plucked at them timidly, rubbed the crackling silk together, and asked a few idle questions, just for the melancholy joy of almost owning one. Poverty stood like a sheet of plate glass between them and possession, but they could not have been women and failed to revel in the glow and luxury of silk and the lilty music of its frou-frou. Silk is a wonderful thing.

For such as were plainly too poor to buy, Lisette had patience; for such as merely loitered about to haggle and dissipate, she had vinegar in an unfailing cruet. There was a slap of rebuke in the very calm with which she rearranged a rumpled flounce, or restored a petticoat to the high shelf from which it had been requisitioned. She said nothing, but women know; and they hated her as well as she them.

Constance had leisure for rumination. At length she broke the silence with a murmurous:

"Say, Lisette, was he a good-looker?"

"Was who a good whatter?"

"Your fireman—the one you sor last night—was he a handsome fella?"

"All firemen is handsome, Constunss. What-

ever they look like out of their uniforms, there's a soitain sumpum about a fireman that is—well, it's simpluh indescri'ble."

"Was this fireman like that—just handsome because he had on a uniform?"

"No, he was one of them who bring sumpum to their glad rags. He had those kind of features that a woman most likes in a man and would hate woist to have on her own physog."

"What was his name?"

"How should I know?"

"Didn't your brother interdooce him?"

"Nah! I wasn't interdooced."

"Oh, Lisette! I never thought you would ——"

"And I didn't."

"Then how'd you come to meet him?"

"Well, you see, it was like this —— [No, m'm, we do not have 'em with a dust-ruffle at one-ninety-eight. Dust ruffles comes on'y in the two-fifty-nines and over—yes, m'm. Don't mention it.] Zize sayin', Constunss, in the theaytre I was planted right behind a dame with a hat trimmed like a Christmas tree. I tried to peek through the branches, but I was so far from gettin' a glimp of the whole stage

that I couldn't even see all of any one actor at once.

"And every time anybody was goin' to do anything important, they went behind one of that dame's feathers. Lord! I could have ran one of her own hat pins in her and turned it round with joy. Finally, I leaned forward and moimured in the back of her neck —— [Yes, m'm, those three-eighties is the same as is sold elsewhere at four-thoiteen! Oh, yes, m'm, that is the latest shade; 'men's wear blue,' they call it; you see, it's finished with two pleated ruffles and a poicaline underlay—some other day? Oh, very well!] I moimured in the back of her neck —— [Those on the top shelf are just the same as these—oh, soitainly, if you wish; no trouble to show goods.] I moimured in the back of her neck:

"'Parding me, madame, but would you kinely remove your hat, please?' I could see her whettin' her shoulder blades together to refuse, so I says: 'Those Paris models is so very large, and Louise don't care how big they make 'em so's they get the distongay lines.'

"That got her. She ran a smile around behind her ear and lifted the lid; but that was

woisse and more of it. She had about eighteen dollars' woith of somebody else's coily locks nailed on top of her own wad, and when she fluffed it out with her fingers, I was all for sayin': 'And now if you'd only take that hair mattress off your head and set on it, or else put your hat back on, I'd stand a chanst.'

"But I didn't dast say it for fear of startin' sumpum. Did you ever notice, Constunss, how you never dare say the best things you think up? My Gawd! there's been times I've conjured up come-backs that would 'a' went over people like a Fi'th Avenyeh bus; but did I spring 'em? Nah! I swallered 'em and boint myself up.

"So there I sat fumin'. I started to ast me brother to ast an usher to ast her to behave or rent a box, but he says to me, 'Shut up and quit beefin'.' Ain't that just like a brother? I knew if I stayed there I'd either paste me brother one on the ear, or say sumpum to that dame under the haystack that would singe her as bald as the goop that didn't take Hoipicide; so I ups and edges out sidewise. I barked four knee-caps, waded through a bundle of plumes and rubbed a cuppla stovepipe hats

the wrong way, but I got into the aisle and hot-footed to the back the house.

"I'm used to hangin' on to straps, and I felt as comfortable as a street-car, leanin' over the back rail, when somebody sidles up alongside and whispers at me. I got a hat pin ready and made up my face to hand him a whole iceboig in one glare, for if there's anything I hate it's a masher. But instead of the usual 'Good-evening, dearie,' he says:

"'You can't stand here.'

"I was that mad I could have slew him; but I allus think it's more ladylike to just josh 'em along and avoid vi'lence. So I hoist me eyebrows a foot or two and says:

"'I can't stand here, eh? Well, I can, and I do.'

"He gives me a look sideways and whispers, 'It's against the law; so beat it, kiddo, beat it.' His woids was calm and simple, but there was sumpum masterful about 'em that was blood-coidlin'. I dropped me haughty pose and tried to wheedle him, like Delilah done with Simpson.

"'I thought you firemen was supposed to save ladies in distress,' I says, 'instead of poise-cutin' 'em.'

"That got his goat, I guess, for he looks sheepish and says: 'You're some kiddo, ain't you, kiddo? But you know we ain't allowed to have standees in theaytres.'

"I made one last try. 'If you're a real fireman,' I says, 'go borry me a scalin'-ladder, so'st I can see over that human hill that's in front of my seat.'

"But he shook his head and he would soitainly have sent me back to me stall if the coitain hadn' 'a' came down just then.

"Between the acks we leaned against the back wall and chinned, and he was pointin' out to me how careful they are about fires in the theaytres now; they have to have so many exits and red lights over 'em and maps of 'em in the progr'ms, and they won't allow no chairs in the aisle and no standees, and even the scenery has to be fire-proofed. He told me the rules was so strick that they wouldn't allow any candles to boin on the stage, and once when May Oiwin, or somebody, was playin' Lady Macbeth, and doin' the sleep-walkin' scene, she hadda carry an electric light.

"I ast him why all that was, and he says because they had that turrible fire out in

Chicago and that woke people up—so now you're safer in a theaytre than anywhere else. If the play don't axphyxiate you, you're all right.

"And he says it ought to be the same way with other things, factories and hotels and department stores. Some of 'em are all right, he says, but he says the rest of 'em will never be made right till they boin up a lot of people. I says, 'Do you know anything about the Mammoth store?'

"'Do I?' he says. 'It's just waitin' like a fireplace all ready for the foist match to start it. And once the Mammoth starts—well, she'll be a lesson to everybody but her proprietors,' he says.

"This give me a nawful funny feelin', and I couldn't think of anything except to be a kind of a bum echo, and say, 'So you know the Mammoth!'

"'Know it!' he says. 'Why, every fireman knows the Mammoth. It's the nightmare of the whole force. The building's as old as Adam and it's been added to and added to, and now it's a Noah's Ark, and if it ever ketches, it would take a second Deelooge to put it out.'"

Constance began to roll her eyes like a young girl reading about burglars late at night.

"Good Lord!" she gasped. "Are you sure there's a fire-escape right over there where you said?"

"I'm sure it's there," said Lisette, "but if this building was a little fire-proofer they wouldn't have any at all."

"Good Lord!" Constance whispered huskily. "I guess I'll go home." She rose in a little individual panic and poised for descent. Then she stopped short: "Well, I gotta stay this week out. Mor has already spent my next Sat'day's pay for me."

Lisette laughed, but a trifle uncomfortably, as one who has told a ghost-story too well. She, too, sought relief in other thoughts:

"Us woikin' goils hasn't got much choice but to slave where they stow us, or else stay outside and starve. Doncha care, Constunss. It's all part of the job."

IV

THE ACTS OF A LADY

CONSTANCE was making a most unhappy morning of it. Every time she tried to gossip airily of romance, she found herself in the fierce red light of danger.

"But the fireman," she urged again, and seized the mention as if it were the man himself.

Lisette went on with her adventure in apparent obliviousness of a plain old lady, who, after pawing the array of petticoats over and under, actually selected and purchased one, a gaudy confection which she would wear beneath her shabby overskirt with a clandestine luxury—the very inverse of the martyr's secret penance with a shirt of haircloth.

But Lisette's heart was so full of her own experience that her hands conducted the sale almost automatically. She passed the petticoat up to Constance, and Constance made a bundle of it and procured the change, while the minds of both were intent upon this wonderful encounter with the poor folk's demigod, a fireman.

At such a time customers merely exist in mirage; for if shop-girls do not gossip before customers, when shall they gossip? Early morning drags them to the shop and late evening drives them exhausted home. Selling incessantly the trappings of romance, how could they live without talking it?

"Well, zize sayin'," Lisette bubbled on, "the fireman says to me—— [Will you take this with you or have it sent?—charge account?—C. O. D.?—Oh, very well. Yes, m'm. I'll see that you get it 's evening. Mark that 'special,' Constunss!] And he says to me, 'You're speakin' of the Mammoth,' he says. 'Do you woik there?'

"I pulled a frown on him and edged away, and I says, 'Me woik! Can't you tell a lady when you bump against one?'

"I thought I had him froze, but he comes back, 'Yes, kiddo, I kin, and that's why I'm astin' you do you woik there?'

"Just like that! He sure handed me a hot one then, didn't he? Still, I like a fella that's got some bounce-back to him, don't you?

"So I drops the mask of refinement, and when he repeats:

"'No, indeed! I'm a poil-diver at Tiffany's'"

"'Do you woik at the Mammoth?'

"I says, 'No, indeed! I'm a poil-diver at Tiffany's.'

"And he shook his head and says, 'Say, kiddo, you're all right.' Yes, he did. And then he says, 'Can I see you home?'—right like that. Whew! It took my breath away. I just barely had presence of mind enough to say, 'Not if I see you foist.' I thought that was what they call a maidenly answer, don't you?"

Constance' hopes of a crimson romance fell like shot birds, and her jaw fell with them: "Aw, and you didn't let him see you home? You didn't! And him a fireman! Ain't you ever goin' to see him again?"

Lisette sighed. "I don't know; it all depends on fate. Say, can you read palms, Constunss? No? I wish't you could. That might tell."

"And you didn't put him wise to who you was?"

Lisette drew herself up with the towering indignation of unassailable virtue: "Say, whattaya think I am, Constunss? Do you consider it the ack of a lady,—and I'd hate to

believe I ain't such,—to meet a poifect stranger and hand him her name and address? If that's your idea of me, you got another guess comin' to you."

"But you talked to him," Constance pleaded in self-defense.

"O' course I talked to him. He had a right to address me because he was a fireman and I was trespassin' on his presoives. And I wouldn't 'a' went as far as I did if it hadn't 'a' been for that. I can do a little reparteeing with anybody that thinks he can jolly me along, but as for gettin' familiar without bein' interdooced,—not for mine, Constunss, not for mine. Even a fireman can't lure me out of my senses; and the minute he got so fresh, I bade him a' icy good-night and went back to my seat behind the lady with the hair-store on her head."

Constance felt the shock of one reaching for the imaginary step at the top of the stairs. She wailed again:

"And you never told him even where you woiked at—nor your name nor nothin'?"

"Well," Lisette confessed slowly, "I believe I did let fall a sudgestion that I was No. 318 in the Mammoth."

Constance' face lighted up in a flash: "Then, he'll be here! he'll be here!"

Lisette quelled her: "Hush, Constunss, you're attrackin' attention. And take it from me, he'll never come here amongst these female hyenas. He's on'y a fireman after all."

"What's his name?"

"How sh'd I know?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

"How could he?"

"He don't know your name and you don't know his! Oh, that's awful!"

"But we got each other's numbers. I took a peek at his badge and his number was—thoity-se'm. That se'm is a lucky number, but that thoity don't listen very good."

V

PRISS AND MOTHERDEAR

CUSTOMERS were pouring into the store with such increase that the aisles were compact with women, mostly eyes, claws and elbows.

It was discouraging to illusions to see the gentler sex *en masse;* but Lisette had no illusions about womankind, and she felt that her contempt for her sex was all too well deserved.

The petticoat-treasury, where she presided, had lacked the advantage of special advertising that morning, and there was no run on the bank. But the proprietors knew that the other counters would catch those who could not reach the bargains, as well as those in whom the bargain counters had kindled the lust to buy, buy, buy.

Lisette's petticoats accordingly acquired a gradual trade of such briskness that her conversation with Constance was confined to an occasional epigram on some unattractive or in-

tractable customer. It was well past the noon hour when Lisette gave a sudden alarm:

"Constunss! Constunss!"

Constance almost leaped from her turret: "What's matter? Store on fire?"

"No, you mut; but take a good peek at these two dames just comin' down the aisle. The old lady was sixty-three last Thoisday and she don't look more'n old enough to be her daughter's sister; and she's dressed up like a coupla queens. Can you ummagine your maw or mine darin' to wear a real hat like that? And her daughter——"

"How'd you know it's her daughter, and her age and all that?"

"Didn't you read about Mrs. Voiden's boithday party in last Sunday's *Woil'?*"

"Who's Mrs. Voiden? Where does she woik?"

"Oh, Constunss, Constunss, don't tell me you never hoid of Mrs. and the Misses Lancaster Voiden! Why, a society column without their names in it would be like Hamlet with the omelet left out. Didn't she entertain the Oil of Boikshire last week? And they do say her daughter—this one that's glidin' our way—is

said to be engaged to the Oil. She'll be an Oiless if she marries him.

"But I hope she don't. I think us American goils gotta right to refuse these corrupt foreign nobilities just seekin' us for our wealth and not for true love like honest Americans, nature's noblemen. That's what the papers says, and I suppose it's us American womanhood's duty to marry home industries, but I'd hate to think what I'd do if I was tempted to become the grand dame of a Dook or a Baritone."

Constance was staring at the Verdens, mother and daughter. She felt such awe of such glory that she could hardly credit it.

"I don't believe it's them," she said; "if they're so rich and swell, what would they be doin' in a cheap place like this?"

"Rich folks, Constunss, are savinger than the poor. That's why they're rich. You and me are lavish at times, but the rich know what their money's woith and go after it."

Straight to the counter of Lisette came the aristocrats. Lisette, the haughty and the cynic, was so impressed by this contact with the American peerage that her voice and her hands trembled. It was like being presented

at Court, and Lisette listened quiveringly for what manner of talk these people should use.

Lisette considered herself a student of high life. She was a voracious devourer of gossip about the rich, and their more or less deserved notorieties. In her eagerness to read the minutiæ of the millionaires, she would skip the head-lines on the front page of a newspaper—unless they chanced to concern some one of social prominence, or alleged social prominence; for the kindly persons who design and decorate the news, realizing the insatiable hunger for incessant mention of "society leaders," are generous to a fault in calling nearly anybody who gets into trouble, or into the lime-light anyhow, a social leader, even of a village. As all women who are arrested are pretty, so all women who attract attention must be prominent in society, or actresses, unless they are hopelessly pauper.

Lisette cared little who discovered which Pole, or overturned some ancient despotism, but she must know who wore what, when, or was reported to be engaged to whom, the prominent social leader of where. As for the chronicles of the great middle classes, or the greater lower classes, she would say:

"Not for mine! I get a good and plenty of the simple life without readin' about it."

News to her was news of the busy rich, and she had an astonishing knowledge of their reported whereabouts and of their published portraits. The Lancaster Verdens were among her favourite heroines, and she recognized them from afar at the first glance. From the society novels she devoured, she had gained a distinct impression that the upper classes employ a formality and precision of speech of the type that made Dr. Samuel Johnson infamous. She prepared to show the Verdens that they were not the on'y swell speech-artists; that there was others.

To her stupefaction, the Verdens proved to be simple, kindly and utterly lacking in that effete languor which, according to all published authorities, is the unfailing characteristic of the pampered scions of luxury.

As Lisette gradually learned, Miss Priscilla Verden's maid, Lucienne, was going to be married to the second man (whatever that might be), and mother and daughter Verden were making a lark out of enhancing the bride's trousseau. They called the maid something

like "Lees-yen," on which Lisette chose an opportunity to comment to Constance:

"Sounds like Chinese money to me. And what's that 'second man' idea?"

Constance had an opinion and whispered it down: "They call the bridegroom's gempman friend the 'best man,' so that would make the bridegroom the 'second man,' wouldn't it?"

"Maybe it would," said Lisette dubiously, and turned to watch the Verdens rummaging the silken stack with hands whose gloves bulged over rings of evident massiveness. The two women were less like the traditional rich than like children happening on a pirate's cave.

"Motherdear, would you look at this?" Priscilla cried, haling from the depths of noisy colour one petticoat of an exquisite beauty.

Lisette glanced up at Constance, nodded her head, and murmured: "She knows what's what, and she's went right to it. Out of all them toikey-trots she's picked the bunny-hug."

She wanted to say as much to the young princess, but she was afraid to trust herself to speech. Besides, the elder Mrs. Verden was putting on a motherly pair of spectacles to see better, and she was saying:

"Isn't it darling! It's as pretty as it can be, Priss."

"It's really good, you know. What do you call this material, please?" She turned to Lisette with an apologetic meekness. Lisette jumped at the unexpected appeal.

"Chiffonn taffeta, m'm," and she had hardly strength enough to add, "You see it's got the side-pleated flounce and the goidle top of Joisey silk."

"So it has! You see, motherdear! It's really awfully good, isn't it? And the colour—it's a sort of—well, it's on the purple and yet it isn't, is it?—quite?"

"It's what we call wistaria poiple. Yes, m'm."

"Well, I like it so much I'm going to wear it myself. And look at the price, motherdear! Only six-ninety-five! And that cat of a Marnot charged me eighteen dollars a piece for things I wouldn't wear to a dog fight."

The mother bent down with skillfully appraising fingers. "It's astonishing! How do they ever do it?"

"They've probably got a silent partner that steals 'em, eh?" She turned to Lisette with a

smile so infectious that Lisette's eyes twinkled with a certain comradery.

But Motherdear shook her handsome old head and sighed: "I'm afraid, Priss, that they're made by poor women who work their fingers to the bone day and night for a pittance."

"That's so. You remember that pitiful old Mrs. What's-her-name we found going blind and starving, but always sewing in that back tenement? Whew! I can remember the climb yet."

"Yes, it's work like that that makes bargains like these."

Priscilla let the glistening fabric drop as if she could feel in it the ache of weary fingers:

"It sort of seems a crime to buy them, doesn't it, and encourage such cruel prices?"

The mother shook her head: "Still if nobody buys them, the poor souls won't get anything at all."

"That's so."

For a long moment the two women pondered this ancient riddle in political economy, while Lisette, who knew so much of poverty from the inside, stared at them with a sort of fascinated affection. She who had feared nobody else

was cowed by the every-day decency and unaffected naturalness of these two visitors from another planet.

But the two women were so well used to realizing that there were deserts of pauperdom to which their wealth was only a spoonful of water, that they soon dismissed the oppressive vision they could not hope to relieve. They were women after all, and sad as the world might be, silk was silk and colour colour. They sought relaxation in the glorious tonic of extravagance. They bought petticoats enough to have smothered their Lucienne.

They were patient and shrewd. They could tell shoddy from true, and "Please!" was always the courier to their demands, as "Thank you" was their after-rider.

Lisette felt so much at her ease that she began to call them "Mrs. Voiden" and "Miss Voiden," which caused them to exchange shy glances of surprise.

"How do you happen to know our names?" Motherdear asked a trifle sheepishly.

Lisette was going to allude to their pictures in the papers, but before such tact, she thought to use also a little tact, and she said:

"Oh, everybody has hoid of the Voidens' charitable woiks."

Both women actually blushed at this, and Motherdear's spectacles misted as she gasped:

"Well! that's very sweet of you!"

After all, fame is fame, and this violet flung upward to them from below was startingly comfortable. They bought still more.

They bought for other servants and for themselves with a democratic rivalry, and Lisette was none the less won to them by the fact that their large purchase meant a large increase in her commissions.

When they had finished their business, the elder woman said to Lisette:

"Thank you so much, my dear. And now if you could tell us where we would find the furniture department?"

"Foiniture is on the eight' floor. You'd best take the elevator. Go to the thoid counter, then toin to the right, and go past the misses' lonjery, toin to the left and—I guess I better show you."

"No, don't trouble, my dear. We'll find it. Good-morning!"

Both women nodded and smiled, and wan-

dered down the aisle, pausing and staring every-whichway, two youngsters in a fairy woods. Lisette's gaze followed them like a benediction. Then she drooped against the shelves and cast her eyes up at Constance:

"Whattaya know about that, Constunss? I've stood snobbery and impoitenence and bossin' around from truck-drivers' wives that done their own wash, and I hadda live to be treated like a human bein' for the foist time by the very cream dee lah cream off the top of the highest society. Can you beat it?"

"But o' course, everbody hasn't had the advantage of being brang up like the Lancaster Voidens"

VI

CUPID GOES SHOPPING

THE next while of toil Lisette spent in a haze reconstructing her social categories. She was in an unusually amiable frame of mind, but three or four women who were exacting and dictatorial were brought up with the sharp turn of a whip-snapper. One of them proclaimed her intention of reporting Lisette to a floor-manager; Lisette only laughed:

"Go as far as you like, m'm. I s'pose I been spoiled by waiting on regular patrons o' mine like Mrs. Lancaster Voiden and her daughter. O' course, they have different ideas over in Guttenboig."

"Who says I come from there?"

"Well, who did says it? Not me, m'm, I'm sure. I says 'They.' I didn't know as You was They. It wasn't when I went to school." Then she sighed, "But o' course, everybody hasn't had the advantage of being brang up like the Lancaster Voidens."

The shopper retreated in confusion and did

not venture on a complaint. She, too, read the society columns. She, too, wished to know what the Verdens looked like and acted like. Now she had come unawares upon one who knew them—had actually sold them things! The same person had sold things to her, and she had comported herself with inaccuracy to the Verden code. She was ashamed and felt that she had merited the epithet "Guttenbergian," though it was from Williamsburg that she came. The other loiterers along the counter treated Lisette with positive homage now. They did not wish to risk that label. They did not wish to slink off with the brand of Guttenberg on their brows.

A little later, Constance, bending over to hand Lisette a parcel, found her in a trance, motionless and staring. Constance, who supposed that Lisette was still basking in the after-glow of the Verden visit, had to prod her awake. Lisette passed the bundle into the waiting palm with the absentness of a sleep-walker, and it was almost drowsily that she faltered:

"Constunss, would you! look who's here!"

"Look who's where?"

"Do you lamp that lad in blue?"

"Yes."

"It's him!"

"Not your fireman?"

"Well, I don't know as he's mine. He's still got the city's number on him, and yet—well,—I hate to talk about myself—but ——"

"Oh, Lisette, he's followed you here! I told you he would."

Lisette nodded graciously and mused aloud: "Maybe I ain't dead yet after all. I thought I was, but as long as a goil can loor a man into a den of wild animals like this,—and a fireman of all men! well, she hadn' oughta despair."

"Ain't you excited?"

"Excited? I got enough firewoiks in my heart to make the Fourth of July look like this store on a Sunday night. I'm so happy it hoits."

VII

A HERO AFRAID

LISETTE was not used to conquests. Two years ago, there had been a floor-walker in her life whose devotion she had apparently earned rather than captured, but he had deserted her for a younger and prettier newcomer. Here was a man who had been fascinated by the first sight of her, as men are fascinated in books. He had followed her to her lair. It would have been enough that any man should have succumbed to her attractions, but that this wonder-victim should be a fireman ——! The event was seismic. She clung to the counter, for the floor was billowing under her feet.

Constance, like a Sister Anne in a tower, watched him come with equal amazement and almost equal rapture. He came sidling, halting and gawky; but he came! and he was a fireman!

Fearless, even among his fearless mates, No. 37 was as timid as a fawn here. He

was doubly timid, for he was seeking a girl who had charmed him, and he was seeking her in a female Pandemonium. He would almost as comfortably have invaded a harem. He lingered at the other counters, pretended to inspect their wares, and rather to drift to Lisette than to bear down on her.

But at last he arrived. There was ample time for Lisette to gain some control over herself, though her heart was dancing syncopated music in her bosom. She eyed No. 37 gloatingly through half-shut lids, and her smile was superior. He had been afraid of all these women and of his mission, but was more afraid of her.

"Was you wishing to poichase something?" she murmured, and coughed to smuggle the hitch through her voice.

"Yes, I—er—why,—why, hello, kiddo!" He tried to mimic surprise, but he was as bad an actor as could be. He grinned idiotically as he added: "So this is where you work."

"This is where," Lisette said.

"So you're sellin' things like these." He picked up a petticoat as if it were a live ember and mumbled: "What are these,—parasol covers?"

"Those are petticoats," Lisette answered.

"Oh!"

She waited a while, then she stilettoed him with a merciless:

"Was you wishing to buy one?"

"Yes."

This was an astonishing counter-thrust. It was she that stammered now with a poor attempt at sarcasm:

"I didn't know firemen wore 'em."

He met her stiletto with a sabre: "But a fireman could buy one for a lady friend, couldn't he?"

"It's a free country," she mumbled, and collapsed with an abrupt sinking of the heart. She was so unused to being belovered that she was easily thrown into a panic of fear. She rebuked herself for being conceited enough to imagine that one mere meeting with her could have entranced this hero into tracking her down. She was suddenly convinced that he had come to buy one of these gewgaws for another woman. It was merely a coincidence that she happened to be at this counter. She felt that she had no right to be jealous of this casual acquaintance. But she was jealous—nauseated with jealousy.

VIII

A DUEL UNDER MASKS

THE romantic castle of soaring turrets that Lisette's fancy had flung into the air with instant architecture returned upon her defenseless head. She had gripped the counter before lest her rapture engulf her. She gripped it again to hold her up among the raining débris of her hopes. She had only her haughty bravery to support her loosened knees.

But the fireman knew nothing of her inner earthquake; he saw only a shop-girl regarding him with grim eyes that looked down along a high-held nose and past a chin thrust out. He gripped the counter on the opposite side and dropped weakly on a stool, bunting away a fat woman who was just arriving at the same conclusion.

"How much would one of these things set me back?" he demanded, clutching up a big fistful of crêpe-de-chine.

"The price is marked in plain figgers," said Lisette, and turned to the fat woman with an extraordinary suavity: "Was you lookin' for any shade in particular, m'm? These changeable taffetas is being much wore nowadays."

"Are they?" said the fireman, and ravaged the array of a *peau de cygne* atrocity. "Is this one of 'em?"

"That is not one of 'em," said Lisette over her left shoulder. "That's a 'pode seen.'" She reverted to the fat woman. "Or you might prefer one of these messalines. I've just sold some of these to Mrs. Lancaster Voiden."

"You did!" the woman exclaimed.

"You did?" the fireman echoed.

"What other shades you got in these?" said the woman, and the fireman leaned closer to learn.

"Them comes in Copenhagens, Bogotas, nicotines, helios, ciels, taupes,—here's a nice apricot. Miss Priscilla Voiden was tellin' me she just loved this wistaria."

"Gimme a wistaria," said the fat woman, trying to look as wistarious as possible.

"Got any more of them wisterriers?" said the fireman. But Lisette was making out a

sales-slip. She passed the petticoat and the slip up to Constance, whose fingers fumbled at her task, for she was revelling in the fearful joy of a third party to a lovers' quarrel. Lisette waited for the return of the change and the parcel, and the baffled fireman was given time enough to study Lisette's back. And Lisette believed in Lines with a capital L, even if a party hadda wear one of them crool C. Q. D. corsets to get the effeck.

When the highly respectable fat woman had received her immorally gorgeous petticoat and fled with it, Lisette turned to the fireman with a look of bland blankness that seemed to say: "You still here? I thought I had rubbed you off the slate."

But No. 37 was not to be rubbed off. It was a part of his trade to pick up screaming and scratching women and carry them out of danger. He spoke with a quiet strength that daunted Lisette again:

"Do I get waited on, or don't I?"

"Soitain'y, sir; what can I do for you?" Lisette resorted for defense to trade formulas.

"I was tellin' you I'm lookin' for one of these things for a lady frien'."

"Well, help yourself. The prices is marked in ——"

"You said that once, kiddo. But I don't know nothin' about women's duds."

"Rully?"

"What'd you advise me to buy?"

"Well, it's hard to say, not knowin' what kind of lady friends you run to."

"Forget it, kiddo. This girl's a nice girl, but she's got a lot of style, and she's all right."

"Maybe she'd like one of these stripes."

"Cheese! would a respectable girl be seen in a barber-shop sign like that?"

"She's not supposed to be seen in it. Some very quiet ladies wears some very loud underskoits."

"They do?"

"They do. How about this reseda, or this jasper?"

"Would she like it?"

"How sh'd I know?"

"Would you?"

"Oh, me! I wouldn't be found dead in it."

"Well, say, kiddo, do me a favour and pick out the one that you'd like best of all."

Lisette felt that this was an unnecessarily

harsh trick fate was playing on her, but her duty to the shop was paramount. She ransacked the stock and drew out a filmy complexity.

"If it was me, I'd choose this. It's a straight model. It has the six inch slash at the side that makes it a 'free walker.' It's small, and clingy, and looks like you hadn't any on at all —that is, I mean—it don't interfere with the Lines—they're wearin' those slinky skoits nowadays that clings to the figger."

"I've noticed that," the fireman muttered and flushed at his own devilishness.

"Well, I guess they're as decent as the hoop-skoits ever was. Take it from me, Mr. Fireman, respectability hasn't got nothin' to do with fashions. If them French dress-builders was to decide that ladies was to go barefooted and wear bathin'-suits on Fi'th Avenyeh this summer, your own mother would be ashamed to wear a skoit. And I guess at that she'd be dressed as decent as her mother was. It ain't what you got on outside that makes voitue, it's what's goin' on inside. You could put some dames in divin'-suits and they'd corrupt the devil-fish, and you could put other dames in—

well, I bet Priscilla Voiden could give a afternoon tea in the Garden of Eden and not—well, say! What colour do you think your lady friend would prefer?"

Abruptly, Lisette realized that she was getting in deep water with this stranger, and he was beginning to gasp for air on his own account. He sought refuge again in:

"What colour would you want?"

"This powder blue gets me."

"I'll take that."

"What size does your lady friend wear?"

"How in—how do I know?"

"Well, is she tall or short—a telegraph pole or a squash?"

"She's just about your size."

His voice and his eyes dropped and he coughed slightly. Lisette had a motto: "When a party clears their throat when they're talkin' to you, there's sumpum off the level somewhere." She shot a quick glance at the fireman. Surreptition and deceit were written all over his florid features.

Across Lisette's tormented brow passed something strangely soothing like a cool breeze on a hot day. Her soul said, "Oh, my Gawd!"

But she forced herself to look calm, and just waited. Perhaps she was wrong after all. She would not trust the fates to-day.

The fireman raised his guilty eyes and muttered with much hemming in the throat:

"What size did you say?"

"I wear a forty-two len'th."

"Well, wrap up a forty-two and take the change out of that." He passed over an impressive bill.

Lisette made out a sales-slip with shivering pencil, and rather gasped than asked:

"Take it with you—or have it sent?"

"Sent."

"What name and address?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know!"

"You wouldn't tell me."

IX

DIGNITY AT ALL COSTS

LISETTE stared at him hard. Then she stared at him soft. Then he vanished. A fog of tears effaced him from her eyes. She was making a curious kind of sound between an outgoing sob and ingrowing giggle.

The fireman watched her with anxious stare. He saw her struggling with ecstasy, and he saw her conquer it. He saw her shake her head and scatter the tears from the lashes that pierced them. One of the tears struck his hand. He put his other hand over it with uncouth tenderness. He saw the hard grim look come back on Miss 318's brow and lips, though her chin was all crumpled with a desire to weep.

She reached one hand to Constance, who was wrapping up the powder blue petticoat as if it were the going-away splendour of a bride.

"Pass me that skoit back, Constunss," said Lisette, and the dumbfounded girl placed it in her hand. Lisette took it and laid it on the

counter. With her other hand she offered the money to the fireman.

The fireman stared in bewilderment: "What's the matter with the yellow boy? Ain't it good?"

"I suppose so; though I ain't a counterfeit expoit."

"What's the matter, then?"

"I'm just as much obliged, but I cannot accep' poissonal gifts from strange gempmen."

No. 37's eyes, mouth and palms fell open with amazement and awe. Into his supine hand she pressed the bill, and closed his fingers on it. Her hand was so hot it seemed to sear him, but though he winced, he shut his fist tight, clamped his jaws and screwed his eyelids close. Then he growled:

"Well, o' course, if that's how you feel about it."

He rose like a cinnamon bear and lumbered off. Constance collapsed, but Lisette slowly untied the parcel, folded back the paper, and drew forth the powder blue silk. Dark blots appeared in it suddenly—slow rain from her aching eyes.

As she watched, the fickle colours changed,

and ran. Her heart seemed to be beating about among the cords of her throat, but she shoved it back into place.

Constance leaned from her tower and stared down in amazement. Could this broken thing be the haughty Lisette she had known? With mingled tenderness and unbelief, she murmured:

"Why, Lisette!—honey!—are you cryin'?"

Lisette took her grief in clutch, tossed her tears away, held up the streaked petticoat to Constance, and said with her hardest tone:

"O' course not. I was just tryin' to see if this guaranteed colour would run. And now look at the darned thing!"

X

A WARNING IN VAIN

HER bravado was not great enough to confront the downcast reproof in Constance' eyes. When she moved back to her counter she saw that the fireman had returned and was elbowing his way forward among the pawing and hesitating women. He beckoned her, and she leaned nearer across with uncontrollable eagerness:

"Say, kiddo, I think I'm in wrong with you. You passed me the frozen mitt, but since I met you las' night and found out you worked here, I ain't been easy about it a tall."

"What's distoibin' you?"

"I don't like to have you work here."

"What's the matter with this place?"

He lowered his voice further and motioned her to an unoccupied ledge.

Lisette edged his way with misgivings. It was not her custom to hold this sort of cross-counter tête-à-tête; it did not look well, and it invited rudeness from aisle-managers. But

curiosity overwhelmed caution, and she perked a hungry ear to the fireman's mumble:

"I don't want to say nothin' to set them females off their nut, but between I and you, this here Mammoth is a mammoth fire-trap, like I told you last night. Some day there's goin' to be a tradegy here that'll tear this old town to pieces. The buildin' is nothin' but a holler shell, chock full of human beings and a million dollars' worth of the easiest burnin' stuff in God's world. Once she starts, hell will pop, and there's nothin' to it.

"Us firemen all know it, but we ain't police, and some of our worst fires have been in buildin's that don't break no laws.

"We jammed a bill through recent, the Hoey Law they call it, and it helps some, but it's only a beginning. We ain't got half enough money, or half enough hands even to inspect the buildings, to say nothin' of ——"

"Which way do I go to buy a jar of cold cream?" some woman wedged in.

"Two aisles that-a-way, three to the left, then two to the right, and—and ast a floor-walker if you can find one, which you can't."

The woman trudged on, and Lisette turned

back to the fireman, whose fervour was making an orator of him. He went on earnestly: "To say nothin' of seein' if our orders is carried out after we turn our backs. This store is one of the worst in New York, and New York is the worst fire hazard in the whole world."

"I thought us Americans was so clever and progressive."

"Clever and progressive—hell!—excuse my French, but—why, our fire loss every year is bigger *per capiter*, as the sayin' is, than the loss of England and Germany and France and a couple of other countries piled together. Last year in these here United States, nearly two thousand lives was lost by fire, nearly five hundred of 'em in little old New York. And the fire loss was a quarter of a billion dollars. And at that we spent another quarter of a billion on fire departments."

Lisette was impelled to a compliment: "I guess the fire department's woith it. I understan' you fellas are the best firemen in the woild."

"We gotta be. We get more practice than anybody else; more fires and worse ones. Why, I've known times when we've had four burning at once, and our chief has went for

sixty hours without takin' his clothes off. But, as I was sayin', I got to thinkin' about you workin' here all day every day, and I couldn't sleep worryin' over you. I just laid there and sweat ice-water."

"Oh, I'm all right!" Lisette faltered, touched to the core by the unusual glory of being worried over.

"But you ain't all right, and you ought to know it. I don't want to throw no scare into you, but you got a right to know what you're up against."

"Can you tell me where to find the tailor-trimmed hats?" a weary voice interrupted.

"Do you mean the mannish doibies? They're straight ahead, past the rotunda and then a half toin to the left. Yes, m'm."

She recurred to No. 37: "Why don't they make the Mammoth store safe?"

"They can't afford to tear the blamed thing down and build it up again. Riskin' lives looks cheaper than riskin' the business. There's no doctorin' this old hulk."

"Well, why don't the newspapers warn people to keep away? They're so anxious to expose everybody, why don't they expose this?"

"And lose a page of advertisin' every day in the year? Not much! You can't get 'em even to criticize the big shops. Look at that killing that was done in one of the biggest department stores a while ago. Not a single paper mentioned the name of the place."

"If somebody had 'a' got killed at our house, or in a little shop, though, or in a home like the Voidens, they'd tell names quick enough."

"You bet they would. And they'll tell the name of this place quick enough when it burns down and the advertisin' stops, and the proprietors are indicted, and there's a ton of fire scareheads that'll make the Slocum fire look like nothin' and the Triangle fire like less'n that. Aw, I tell you, Miss whatever your name is—I tell you, this town's in for a black day. There'll be one great big black day, and then everybody all over the country will get busy with the department stores like they done with the theaytres."

"Why've we gotta wait?" Miss 318 broke out. "Why don't they arrest the proprietors foist—before the black day comes? Why've we gotta boin up a lot of poor shriekin' souls foist?"

"That's the American way," the fireman

growled. "We're young and rich and we got money to boin—and we like the smell of smoke."

Miss 318 was turning panicky: "Can't anything be did to fix the store right? I pretend to hate it sometimes, but there's a nawful lot of nice folks here. And Mr. Hoishboig and Mr. Poswalsky are as considrut as they can afford to be. I have awful rows with these bargain-hunters, but I wouldn't wish the woist of 'em to scorch her little finger, to say nothin' of—oh, whyn't somebody do sumpum?"

"There's too much to do, kiddo."

"I guess I'm lost. I can't seem to find the misses' serge dresses, please."

"The soiges is one flight up. Elevator to the left."

The fireman scowled at the incessant interruption, but went on: "Well, in the first place, this place ought to have a fire crew assigned by the city; none of these half-baked private crews that try to put out what they can't. There ought to be automatic alarms to our Fire Headquarters so'st we won't have to wait for somebody to remember to run to a pull-box. Then we ought to have as big a space as this broke up, with fire-walls dividin' it into four

compartments. That'd give us firemen a chance, breastworks to fight behind. We got no more show here than we'd have buckin' the ocean.

"Then they ought to have stone balconies and tower-escapes made out of stone. They ought to have exits everywhere made so'st they can't be locked, and marked so'st everybody can see 'em anywhere. Just listen at these women naggin' the life out of you askin' their way about in broad daylight with no special excitement. What's goin' to happen when somebody hollers 'Fire,' and these blind alleys choke up with crazy folks, all yellin' at once and nobody to ask the way or show it. It will be God-awful. I think they ought to have iron bridges they could lower to the buildin's across the street like gangways on steamers. A few of those would let everybody out and firemen in. There'd be no trapping helpless women then.

"And look at the clutter in the aisles—these extra counters. They oughtn't to allow them things. Every one of 'em is an extra trap. And them stairways. Look at 'em! Windin' round the elevator shafts! Why, it scares me just to see 'em there. Elevators and stairs got no right to associate. It makes two chimney-

flues at once. Each of 'em ought to be in a fireproof shaft by itself.

"And the basement. Think of it! All that stock in the cellar, and the only way out is up a flight of steps where the crowd comin' up will meet the crowd pourin' down the main stair. The basement ought to lead out to the sidewalk.

"And them revolvin' doors! Cheese! I could hardly sneak in amongst the women who had nothin' special to do except to buy something. I thought they'd slaughter me. What would those places look like if a mob in a panic struck them? Why, we couldn't chop our way through with axes."

XI

A CROWDED SOLITUDE

LISETTE shook her head hopelessly. Then she caught sight of the restless throng at her own counter. The other clerks were overwhelmed and Constance was making signals to her. Now, as always, the coercion of the moment was supreme. Lisette slanted towards her neglected task:

"That's turrible interestin', what you say, and I could listen at you talk forever, but——"

"I could go on talkin' all day and not say half," the fireman insisted, not heeding her preparations for flight. "I tell you the biggest job this country's got ahead of it is reformin' this fire business. It's gettin' bigger than the slavery question ever was."

"I know it is and I hope somebody will get busy, but I gotta beat it back to the anvil."

"What's your hurry, kiddo? I run in for a little chin, havin' half a day off."

"But I ain't got half a minute off."

"Oh, I see! Well, all I came to say was this is no place for you."

"I can see you don't like our store very well."

"Kiddo, the only thing I like in this store is—you."

The compliment came so straight from the shoulder that it jolted Lisette like a bouquet that hits one in the nose.

"You firemen are turrible impeturous, ain't you?"

He ignored the feeble comment and tore on: "I don't like to have you workin' here. I tell you, it's too dangerous."

"No more dangerous than starvin' to death," Lisette suggested meekly.

"You ought to get some other job."

"Such as ——"

"Some nice feller's wife."

Lisette nearly blushed: "All the nice fellers I've saw have—well, somebody else has beat me to 'em."

"All of 'em?"

"Well, nearly all."

They looked at each other in shamefaced timidity. He began to breathe hard and she

felt swoony. Love had caught them together and would have his sway. Lisette forgot the call of duty, the danger of reprimand or dismissal. A louder call and a graver danger absorbed her.

She and her fireman leaned crosswise upon a counter, among a nagging, penurious throng in broad day, but their hearts were full of gloaming and dual solitude. The counter might have been a garden gate under a moon-drenched tree. Romance carries its own scenery and sets it up anywhere. In a jiffy it had turned the noisy market into a bower of dreams. It was Arcady, and they were Arcadians both, though what the swain said to Phyllis was:

"Say, kiddo, you've made a smashin' hit with me. You got me scareder than what I was the first time I jumped off a roof into a net. Only now I'm jumpin' without knowin' where I'm goin' to land."

Lisette answered whimsically:

"Well, I can't say as I'm out after you with a net, but—I guess you won't break no bones."

"Say, kiddo, I like you. What's your name?"

Some imp of rapture urged her to toy with

her triumph. Proposals were not so frequent in Lisette's life that she could afford to snap them up. They must be lingered over a little. In fact this was the first honourable proposal she had ever received, for her foregone floor-walker had never quite attained the declaration point. She just had to dally with this catnip a while.

"My name," she said, "is—well—you seem to get along pretty well with kiddo. I never liked that before, but it's growin' on me."

An aisle-manager of undertakerish majesty intervened clammily: "Miss 318—you are wanted at your counter at once."

"Yes, Mr. Phipps."

Lisette started to flit back, but the fireman's big grip vised her wrist:

"Will you come to the theaytre again?"

"I'd—I'd love to."

"To-night?"

"Well, to-night I got a date with a soitain party." She rejoiced to see his eyes turn sickly green. She was merciful:

"I could bring her along."

"Oh, it's a her."

"O' course!"

"I'd rather you'd come by yourself."

"How could I get home?"

"Guess I could 'tend to that."

"Oh, could you?"

"Yep."

"Well ——"

"Shake your lady friend and come by your lonesome?"

"All right! I was wantin' to see that show again—it's a nawful nice show."

"Well, you be there. Give this to the man at the door." He tore off a bit of paper from somebody's else bundle, and wrote with Lisette's pencil:

"DEAR JAKE:

"Please admit my lady friend and oblige No. 37."

Lisette thrust the magic paper into the bosom of her gown and whispered:

"Now I gotta run. I've lost my job a'ready."

"I hope so. I got a better one. I'll get you the ring to-day if you say the word."

"Oh, what a shame I gotta run! I'll see you to-night."

"And say, take that petticoat and pay for it out of this ten, won't you?—to oblige me!"

"All right."

"You can keep the change, kiddo."

"Oh, no—not yet! I'll bring it to you to-night. And I'll call the powder blue taffeta our engagement petticoat. Good-bye."

"Great! Say, can you tell me where I can buy a doll for me little sister?"

But she had fled, plunged into the thick of the fray around her counter. But her gaze kept fluttering after him. She saw him pause to ask the icy Mr. Phipps a question. She saw him pointed upward. And upward he went—like a disappearing god.

It was only then she realized that in her anxiety to tease him about her own name she had neglected to learn his.

"My Gawd," she thought, "I'm the fyonsay of a poifec' stranger."

XII

WHAT HAPPENED ONCE

NO. 37 had come to fill Lisette with terror and he had packed her heart with comfort. She had a protector, a lover. This was no unctuous usher of females, no tyrannous monitor of dreary work women. This man was more than the gorgeous dappernesses that played at heroes in novels. This man was a real hero. Heroism was his job. Danger was his raw material.

When he heard of a place with peril in it, he went there as fast as he could and leapt at the red heart of it. He conquered, not by faith, but by works. His apprenticeship was jumping off buildings into little nets, and climbing precipice walls from window to window. And he got twenty-five dollars a week for being sublime whenever a bell rang.

Small wonder that Lisette made mistakes in quoting prices, gave rash guarantees, mixed up the parcels. Her brain was a music-box booming out wedding marches. But she did not

mix up the powder blue. She was tempted to ask for a rebate on the ground that it was damaged, but she felt that the tear stains gave it added value. So she paid Constance for it and salted away the change, four dollars, where she would not lose it. And then a longing for escape from the crowd oppressed her:

"I gotta get out of this coop, or I'll peck some of these hens' eyes out. Come along, let's grab off a snack o' lunch."

Appeal for leave of absence was made to the floor-walker, who granted it with scant courtesy, and, substitutes being provided, Lisette and Constance set off down the aisle, Constance pouring forth questions, and Lisette withholding the answers in miserly glee.

Lisette had brought along the powder blue aureole to leave with her coat and hat. But once in the dim-lit aisle of the great locker-room, with its two thousand compartments, she could not resist the opportunity to slip off the old petticoat she had worn to rags, and interpolate the new one, which was already hallowed with memories. She made Constance wait for her, and when she appeared again, Constance noted the change in her very gait.

"I soitain'y am steppin' high, Constunss," she said, "but I could show cause. As me brother says—the one that follows the ponies, —'pipe me knee-action.' It's poifectly marv'lous how tired I don't feel now."

As she swung along to the elevator that would take them up to the restaurant, she passed the sallow little survivor of the shirtwaist factory. Lisette said to her:

"Say, listen! We're lopin' to the lunchery. Come on up."

The girl had not intended the extravagance of midday food. She could afford the pangs better than the pence. Her people were buying the irreducible minimum of fuel that would keep their machinery going. Their dinners would have made a scant breakfast for many, and their rule was the two-meal a day plan—if that. But the girl was not advertising her poverty unnecessarily. Her answer to Lisette's invitation was, therefore:

"Thankink you, but I have not hongry yet."

Lisette understood, so she said: "Ah, come along, I'll stake you to the check."

"All right!" This came quickly, zealously, and the three girls hurried along the path thrid-

ding the huge slow crowd with difficulty. They must always be talking, so that even as they met and parted and reunited, according to the exigencies of the throng, Lisette would lose no time.

"I don't think I quite got your name. Mine's Lisette. This is my friend Constunss."

"I am Rosa—Rosa Koplik."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Ko—Ko—Miss Rosa."

"Now tell us all about the fire."

"I do not like to. It is soch a tairrible fire. I do always dream it each night yet."

They were in an elevator full of shop-girls, squeezed together like a bundle of lead-pencils, before she could be persuaded to talk.

"We are working peaceable. It is Saturday. Averybody elses in those beelding is feenish and go home. Soon we go too—in five—six minutes. Then somebody makes a cryink of 'Fire! Fire!' At feerst nobody is speakink or movink. Then averybody is jomp up and run—all ways at the same time. And soch a screamink and soch a tairrible hurry to get out away.

"There is chairs spilled and machines is turn

over and ronnink here and ronnink there. All of us gerls we do not remember anythink, but only we wish to go home.

"The fire comes after us. It rons along the ceilink like it is waves upside down. It bends and gets a machine and a chair—two chairs —many machines. It gets people by the hair."

"You saw girls with their hair blazing?"

"My seester has the hair on fire. She is ron by a window. I try to hold and to put out the hair, but she jomps. She strikes a wire far down and hangs over it, and her clothes is burn. I cannot look any more. I ron by anawther window. I fear to jomp, but I fear to stay. I throw down my hat. I throw down my pocket-book, so that if I do not come home my people shall have the money anyway.

"But I see the other gerls jomp and they—when they strike—it is—it is like dolls when they fall to a floor. I am not so brave. I turn and ron for the door. There is such a many gerls there. The door they cannot open. Whether the key is there, I do not know. Somebody said somebody should to have ron fast and break the door through, but how to do,

when there is soch a pile of gerls there with smoke and fire in the clothes and screamink.

"I ron away. I do not know, but somebody makes me motions to come here. I come there. I remember nothing but I am on a roof. There is young mens there with ladder. It is so I am saved. But my sister—not yet do my father and my mawther know if what we have buried is my sister or somebody else. A little ring is all we can find—her sweetheart is gave that to her, but that also much burned.

"Oh, I cannot talk more. I cannot help to think, but I must not to talk some more. And I cannot to eat now, please. I thank you, but how could I eat now?"

She recoiled from the entrance of the lunch-room, where a staring crowd of shop-women had paused to hear what the girl was muttering with such shivering and twitching of shoulders and hands. Lisette was remorseful for dragging the wretched child back into that infernal memory. She said:

"Come on out of this mob a minute, dearie. Let's us stand over here where there's a little fresh air."

She led the way to the gallery under the

dome, and they looked down the well of the rotunda. Constance' practical mind was dwelling on the aftermath:

"And to think they let off the men that own that factory."

"They had a right to do that, I guess," said Lisette. "If I had been on the jury I'd have stood for acquittin' 'em."

XIII

WILL HAPPEN AGAIN

CONSTANCE stared at her in amazement:

"Ah, quit your jokin', Lisette. If a fella kills another fella—just one—they put him in the eleckric chair. And you think men ought to be let loose who was to blame for a hundred and fifty girls dyin' that way? Don't you think the lor oughta go after such people?"

"I ain't so much intrusted in seein' the lor goin' after criminals as I am in seein' it goin' before 'em. I say the lor oughta beat 'em to it. It oughta prevent a few crimes. I'm kindo' sorry for the poor guys that owned that place. They paid for their carelessness.

"The woist of it is they're no woisse than hunderds of others—better if anything, for I read in the paper that the artchitecks said the buildin' was the fire-proofest there was. And the buildin' is there yet. It was the people in it that wasn't fire-proof.

"The lightnin' just happened to strike that

shop, that's all. It might 'a' struck any place else. It might as well 'a' struck this place,—it prob'ly will."

Constance shuddered: "I wisht you wouldn't keep harpin' on this place ketchin' on fire. It gives me goose flesh to think of it. What I'd like to know is, don't you believe in punishin' anybody for anything?"

Lisette's answer was grim enough: "You bet I do. I'd be the best little punisher that ever was if I had my way. But I'd punish 'em foist. The ones they oughta soak is the ones that own the buildin's where there ain't been no fires yet, but where there's liable to be any minute because they ain't loined any lessons or done anything.

"I tell you, if they'd let me start punishin' there'd be some men doin' time that's only killin' it now. There'd be a nawful holler, but at the end of a year sev'ral hunderd people would be walkin' around alive that would 'a' been cinders if it hadn't 'a' been for my woik.

"There's men committin' moider this minute by just postponin' till to-morra what they had a right to 'a' did yest'day. Us Americans call other people lazy, but look at us—loafin' while

there's fires goin' on that boins up enough prop'ty to feed the whole poor at the Waldof for a year.

"Theaytre managers was that way till the Iroquoy fire scared people from goin' to anything, and then they woke up and said, 'Why, goodness me, it'll be cheaper to put in asbestos coitains and extry exits and give up standees than it is to boin up what audiences we got and not get any more.' And now you're as safe in a theaytre as a choich.

"Some day there'll be a hollycost in one of these big stores that will scare people so you couldn't loor 'em into one if you offered sealskin coats trimmed with oimine for ten cents apiece. There's good stores and safe stores, but they'll suffer with the bad on that day. And everybody knows it, and nobody don't do nothin'."

The best that Constance could put in this troubled torrent was:

"Well, I think somebody oughta do sumpum."

Lisette's laugh was harsh: "Somebody is nobody and sumpum is nothin'. What are you doin' yourself?"

"Who? Me? Oh, I'm too busy to do anything."

"So's everybody else. Us Americans is so infoinally busy we ain't got time to mind our own business. After the big factory fire, everybody talked a lot, and speeches was made and letters was wrote to the papers and hard names was called, and grand juries shot out indictments like pop-corn. Then the dinner-bell rang, and everybody said: 'Forget it! The soup's gettin' cold and don't talk about such things at table. It takes the edge off my appetite. Besides, have you hoid about the turrible things that's goin' on over in Toikey? They're posutuvly uncivilized, them Toiks, they don't think nothin' of human life. And say, what's a good musical show to go to to-night?'

"The night after that shoit-waist fire I went to the morgue with a poor old dame lookin' for her daughter, and we stood in a line a coupla blocks long. It was like the line in front of a box office. That show was a great success, I tell you. They wasn't layin' room. They hadda borry a wharf. Well, whilst we waited, we hadda keep dodgin' because boys was playin' baseball in the street; and people was goin' by laughin' and floitin' the same as ever.

"After all, those poor devils was only a gang

of woikin' goils, Polocks and Finns and Jewesses and the like—no offense to you, dearie." She turned quickly and laid her hand on the young woman at her side, but Rosa Koplik had not heard; she was remembering again that line; she had stood in it with her mother, and found what was left of what was once her sister.

Lisette went on: "But when one of these big shops goes, it'll hit everybody, high, low and middlin'. Some of the richest people in the land comes to places like these. Ain't the Lancaster Voidens here now? When the foist big department store boins, as a soitain party in the fire department was sayin' to me, there'll be a black day that'll rock this whole country.

"There'll be crape on every other door on Fi'th Avenyeh, and in the choiches they'll have to say funerals over half a dozen at once.

"I don't think there'll be more than one fire like that. But I guess we gotta get one. It's the only way to loin this country anything."

She leaned on the rail like the muse Melpomene pondering the tragic face of things.

"Can you see what'd happen if somebody was to holler Fire! here—now? There's about

"Say, goils, don't you smell sumpum boinin'?"

twenty thousand people under this old roof this minute. Can you see what would begin if a teeny red blaze was to come sneakin' along that wall, or if we was to see a little smoke rollin' across the ceilin'? Can you see the women goin' crazy 'to get home'—as Rosa says? Can't you see 'em leapin' into this rotunda from every floor at once like rats drove into a well? Can't you just hear 'em screamin'?"

Constance turned with a protest of angry fear: "Hush, Lisette! What's the uset of scarin' a fella to—to——"

She found Lisette strangely erect, strangely alert.

"Say, goils, don't you smell sumpum boinin'?"

Their three heads went up with a sharp movement, and they stood with throats taut and nostrils nervous as an antelope's studying the wind. Like primeval women they were vitally intent upon the air, catching it up with sharp intake of breath, while their eyes searched wildly. Again Lisette whispered:

"Gawd help us—here she comes."

XIV

IT COMES

THERE was no denying it. The atmosphere was poisoned with the flair of fire, that sullen, treacherous, rattlesnaky smell. Lisette closed her eyes a moment, swayed, clutched her breast with one hand as if to throttle back her plunging heart. Then she gathered herself together, clenched her soul like a fist, and was ready for what might come.

The other girls went to pieces at once. Constance flung her arms about Lisette, huskily demanding:

"Oh, Lisette, Lisette, what are we goin' to do? I don't want to die. I'm afraid, oh, I'm so a-fr-fraid."

Rosa dropped to her knees, and seized her head in her hands moaning:

"My mawther must lose also me. My poor mawther!"

Constance snatched and clawed at Lisette like

a mad cat, but Lisette put her hands away gently:

"Wait a minute, dearie, we gotta do a little thinkin'. Don't make no noise, you mustn't start no panic. That's woisse than a fire, you know. Maybe it's a false alarm. We gotta keep cool, you know, dearie, we gotta—maybe it's on'y ——"

From somewhere below in one of the cells of the labyrinth came a single shriek. Then others—sharp needle cries stitching the silence—then a mumble like the bubbling panic in a vast kettle seething to a boil. And then with one horrible belch of overflow and eruption came the volcanic cry, the myriad-voiced terror of another Vesuvius. And in these four walls there were as many souls as in all Pompeii on her doomsday.

Lisette leaned far over the rail, trying to peer out the place of the fire's origin. On the main floor she saw as through a great telescope a pigmy multitude in a sweeping torrent. Here and there at the gallery rails she saw some figure questioning space for news and counsel. She saw a man run to a lower rail, and leaning far out, search likewise. She knew that man.

She called to him. He did not hear, the uproar was too appalling.

But he looked up. It was her man—her betrothed—her—she did not know his name. All she could cry down the reverberant shaft was:

"Hello, Mister Thoity-se'm! Whattaya want me to do?"

He called back to her, waved and shouted, but his voice was drowned in the storm. Then he disappeared.

And now there was a rush of feet. A stampede of wild cattle. On every floor there pressed a throng of women, battling at the edges like the froth on the edge of a wave, but pressed forward to the rail.

Lisette saw what must happen. She snatched up Rosa and thrust Constance forward from the rim of the well. Constance fell forward on her face like a rag doll. Lisette jerked her roughly to her knees:

"Beat it while the beatin's good—don't stop to faint. We gotta beat it to the elevator. Those boys will run 'em as long as they can—foist come foist soived."

Somehow, swearing and striking, using her nails for claws, and her elbows like short

"Hello, Mister Thoity-se'em! Whattaya want me to do?"

swords, she clove a gangway through the tide, and herded the girls through the darting and incoherent crowd to the shaft.—And there in the car was a wan-faced hero frightened to death, but babbling automatically:

"One at a time, ladies. M-mind the s-step-p."

Many were battling as women battle, with blind and fishwife frenzy. But others were standing about in such an idiocy of fright that they could not move into the cage. The boy's hand was out to close the door on the huddle within, when Lisette arrived. She set her foot on the ledge and, in spite of the fierce protests, jammed the two girls in. She would have followed, but there was no more room. The boy must tug and sweat to close the door. As it clanged shut, he called politely:

"I'll be back in a moment, ladies, I'll be back ——"

The load of humanity shot downward and was gone.

XV

THE BATTLE FOR THE ELEVATOR

LISETTE gripped the iron lattice to hold her place for the next car. There was leisure enough and to spare. She turned in a fascination of horror as she heard from the direction of the rotunda a tearing crash of timber, a toppling and a downward plunging clamour smothered as in a pit.

Back from the brink of the pit, a wave of women surged—muttering, shrieking, sobbing, doing and saying all things ridiculous and commonplace, frustrating one another and themselves, revealing their absolute selves in the soul-nakedness of fear—fear in a frenzy of emulation and jealousy of other fears. Among the women were a few men, clerks and shoppers; and they too were craven or Spartan, according to their natural gifts.

A portion of the mob, too frenetic to wait for a car that might never ascend so far or might never descend without disaster, turned to the stairway, and yelping, buffeting, pleading,

commanding, with arms interlocked and faces like hideous masks in a heap, went rolling and sprawling, trampling and trodden, in a tumbling cataract.

The air was throbbing now with the great musical tone of fire; the diapason of a flame towering a hundred feet. Around this tone shrieked the blare of a vast organ of a thousand pipes with all stops out.

The blaze, starting in the basement, had spiralled irresistibly aloft by the freight elevator shaft, like a waterspout at sea, and reaching the roof, had opened outward in the umbrella of a vast mushroom. And now it was returning downward upon itself.

The rotunda was like the funnel of a huge Olympic—roaring with smoke and an upward red hail of sparks. And blazing fabrics were swept in and twirled and whisked aloft with titanic hilarity.

Against the revelry of this drunken Cyclops, human beings were but ants trapped in a hill of human building, trapped and trampled, tortured and ridiculed, mercilessly exposed in their own shame, forced to mangle one another in a fanatic instinct of self-defense, with the mocking

surety that the survivors but postponed their own destruction.

It was a beautiful thing to find in that roaring furnace souls that walked unscathed, however their bodies fared; souls of courage in unexpected places and surprising ways; foreign peasants who remembered duty and gave themselves to it; native aristocrats who yielded precedence to crippled poor; everywhere utter majesty and utter degradation of thought and deed. People who would have been heroes or saints elsewhere were ghouls and Huns; and the other way about. People whom leisure would have made curs or angels were driven out of themselves by the horrible immediateness, the fatal improvisation of this opportunity to die in a seemly manner.

Lisette, the shrew, the toiler, the workaday daughter of the workaday poor, felt in her the urgings of that old habit of ridiculing others and herself. She wanted to laugh maniacally. In her mind, as in the flue of the rotunda, thoughts went whirling and whisking; wasn't it just like her luck to leave the ground floor and come up here to get caught in this destruction? Wasn't it poifeckly absoid that she

should get herself engaged to a fireman, of all men, just before she got herself boint up? Wasn't she a fool to shove those other goils in the elevator when she had a right to have went down herself and saved herself for her fireman and her own family? Wasn't she a mut to save other mothers' daughters and leave her own mother to tear her hair and wail? Wasn't she a woithless It to be standin' here idle when she'd oughta be sayin' her prayers? Wonder where her fireman was at? O' course he'd perish doin' his dooty! Wonder if there really is anything in that talk about goin' to he'm if you're good? Wonder if she'd know him wunst they passed the poily gates? Wonder if Saint Peter would toin her down because she slep' late Sundays instead of goin' to oily mornin' mass?

About her the women fought and tore like battling harpies, each with a holy desire to save herself for her dear ones. Women fell, and other women's heels ground their hands, knees crushed them. Rings and earrings scattered about the floor, and one woman was crawling about the outskirts of the crowd searching zealously for a lost hat pin.

Lisette could stand it no more to watch this

mob committing suicide upon itself. She began to rebuke and command. She leaped into the press to help to her feet an old woman whom a young man was crowding aside. She struck the man in the mouth and clawed him when he struck back. She wrenched other women out of the places they usurped, crying: "Take your toin! Everybody's gotta take their toin! For Gawsay, be human if you can!"

She raved like a fury in hell, a Tisiphone lashing the damned into order. She cursed, struck, tugged, careless that she found herself always further from the grating of the elevator. Though hatred seemed to rule her with frenzy, her mood was one where hatred and love met and merged.

And so, suddenly she found herself kneaded and rolled out of the crowd entirely. As she turned to strike back into the clotted throng, she caught sight of two women standing aloof —two women she knew, and, in a way, revered.

XVI

A FALSE HOPE

MRS. VERDEN and her daughter were trying to smile, each petting the other's hands with mimic calm and helpless tenderness. The daughter was saying: "Don't worry, motherdear; it will be all right, it will be all ri-right."

And the mother was saying at the same time: "Don't be afraid, Priss, now. Mother will think what's best to do in just a minute—just a minute now."

The word "thoroughbred" glinted through the smoke of Lisette's thoughts. These women had spent their lives holding their impulses in leash, and self-control was become an instinct; dignity was the marrow of their bones.

They saw Lisette and beckoned, from an old habitude of giving orders:

"This young woman will know the way out," said Mrs. Verden to her daughter; and to Lisette: "What would you advise us to do, my dear?"

"It's kindo' hard to say, m'm," Lisette confessed. "I guess we're up against it good and hard."

"Surely there must be fire-escapes somewhere," said Priscilla.

"Well now, wouldn' I forget the fire-escape? Now, wouldn' that jar you? It's over here, if we can make it."

She ran with them along lonely passageways that had been crowded aisles, where the buying of pretty things had been the solemnest thought. They entered then a wing of the furniture department, where an acre of empty chairs and tables stood about with a strange effect of waiting patiently for the flames to come to the resinous feast of their varnished pines. Overhead, the automatic sprinklers hung idle. Some failure had annulled their power. Farther on there was a great room where they had not failed, and there a heavy rain was falling on a deserted field.

Beyond this curtain of water they could see a paradise of flame, raging upward beyond the quenching of any spray. As they watched, a half an acre of floor ripped loose and sank from sight, and a mass of wall and window went

outward opening a view of the sky and of opposite buildings equally out of reach.

"There's the fire-escape," Lisette gasped, "across that water and that hole. O' course, that'd be the foist wall that went."

"I fancy we'd better return to the elevator at once," said Mrs. Verden.

"It's our only chanst," said Lisette, and they hurried back. They passed one girl kneeling and mumblingly moving a rosary through her fingers.

"Better come with us," said Lisette, scooping her up as they passed. But the girl shook herself loose and returned to her beads.

As the three revenants reached the neighbourhood of the elevator, Lisette saw that the car was just rising into view again. The mob before the cage began to eddy and swirl with a churning ferocity that undid all previous successes and failures.

Lisette seized Mrs. Verden's elbow and rushed her forward, and the mother clung fiercely to her daughter's hand. More merciless now than ever, Lisette wriggled and ploughed her way. By a last great lunge she reached the bars just as the nearest poured through the opening door.

Fastening her fingers in the grating, she sheared a little room with her shoulders and crowded the elder woman in, and the mother, gripping the daughter's hand, tugged for a dearer life than her own. But just then a new hurl of the crowd wrenched Lisette's fingers from their grip and cut Priscilla off from her mother. The car started downward, the door ran along its grooves, but could not close. The devoted hands were split apart.

Priscilla would have dropped after the car, but Lisette cast her weight on her and carried her past the chasm. Into this deepening well some toppled, others leaped. The man Lisette had smitten in the mouth jumped to the greasy steel cable, clasped it with arms and legs and slid downward. A woman flung herself at his shoulders, and they vanished to their fate.

Lisette in a hideous wrath fought off the crowd, and slammed the door shut upon the abyss. Then panting, dishevelled and faint with exhaustion, she looked for her other ward. Priscilla was not to be seen.

XVII

MOTHERDEAR

MRS. VERDEN'S anguished gaze had caught one glance from her daughter's eyes, a glance melting with love and farewell, when the car plummeted into a gorge of smoke and sifting embers. At every floor there was a gust of wind and a fleeting vision of faces peering through an iron lattice. It was a descent through the circles of hell.

The car fled downward with a swoop that was a new terror. But the mother's thoughts went back up the shaft. She clutched and called upward.

The car stopped with a shock. Policemen helped out the writhing cargo, and it disappeared in mad haste, but Mrs. Verden would not budge. She pleaded:

"I want to go back! I must go back. My daughter is up there."

An officer reached in a great hand and dragged her out. The door clanged and the

elevator with its devoted attendant went up like a fiery chariot of mercy.

Mrs. Verden turned and beat against the bronze doors crying, "Wait! Wait!" She fought with the policeman; the exquisiteness fell from her; she was back in the jungle period, with one mad female motive, to get to her young. But she could not overpower that tender gorilla in uniform. Tears were pouring down his cheeks and he was shaken with nausea, but he dragged her away.

The revolving doors had done their work as No. 37 prophesied, but the firemen had made havoc of the plate glass show-windows, split through the woodwork back of them, and opened egress to some of the captives and ingress to themselves.

And now the helmeted fire warriors were fighting ruthlessly towards the flames. Everywhere within and without the building the streams of water went out like gleaming javelins, but with no effect as yet upon the walls of smoke.

Mrs. Verden was guided over broken glass, splintered wood, writhing snakes of hose and out to the spray-blown air of the street. Every-

where there were chugging engines sending out billows of sparks and smoke, and the clang of new fire companies arriving. And numberless ladders were up, with rescuers carrying limp burdens along sagging bridges. Up the precipice walls other firemen were crawling with scaling ladders, performing miracles of salvation.

Others held nets like targets for desperate marksmanship. Along a wall strips of tarpaulin were hiding an increasing row, where surgeons and priests were working at the mercy of the first toppling wall.

Across the wet plaza, the officer compelled Mrs. Verden and tried to prevent her seeing the almost unendurable. He surrendered her with a few brief words to another officer, and lumbered back into the building. This other policeman was hurling all his weight against the crowd that pressed forward with a morbid and helpless curiosity. And this hulk, too, was green and sickly, and the curses he heaped upon the spectators were broken with sobs as he saw what he saw.

"Some of yous guys take this lady," he shouted, "and git her to a amb'lance quick. She's all in and she's lost a kid in—in there."

A murmur of sympathy ran through the crowd, and a way was opened magically. One man, a social struggler, who had tried for years to meet Mrs. Lancaster Verden, took her by the arm, never dreaming who this smoke-stained, unkempt, dripping wretch might be.

He was gentle with her:

"Come this way, won't you? I have my car here and I'll take you home."

"I don't want to go home," she wailed; "I want my child, my baby." And he must struggle with her to keep her from fighting her way back. A doctor came forward and took her in charge. They persuaded her into a shop, and the doctor plied her with sedatives. But her fever was beyond drugs. Her first thought now was from old experience—that money had always put spurs to service in her behalf. She turned to the man:

"If you will go find her—my child—my Priss—I'll give you anything—anything! My husband will give you a million dollars for my baby's life."

The doctor and the man exchanged glances of sardonic gloom. What was money here? Everything that humanity could do was being

done under the tremendous urge of sympathy. Money and prayer were of equal futility. The only hope was the fierce response of mankind to mankind's cry for help.

"We'll find your daughter," said the doctor, lying glibly. "She'll be all right. The ladders are going up and they're getting the fire down already. She'll be all right. If you will let us take you home now and ——"

"Take me home, while my child is there?" she screamed, tearing away their hands. "Do you think I would go home to her father without her? No! no! I must go find her. Priss —don't be afraid—I'll come and get you. Don't worry, child, motherdear will come to you—just wait a minute. And don't jump! Don't jump! Wait! Wait!"

The two men must wrestle hard to resist that mother-frenzy.

XVIII

THE TRYSTING-PLACE

LISETTE, glaring through the crowd, now reduced to inaction with the prostration of hope, caught sight of Priscilla's plume at a distance. She called, but had no answer; called again:

"Miss Voiden, Miss Voiden, come here!"

But she had no answer. She waited, saw the elevator chains quivering as the car rose again. She could not go alone. She broke through the crowd again, and they willingly let her pass.

She found Priscilla darting here and there, seeking an outlet and finding none. She seized her roughly by the arm.

"Come on! the car's comin' back this minute! Come on! I'll get you in!"

But Priscilla shook her head.

"I can't fight those people. I'd much rather die than steal anybody's else chance—really I would."

It was a kind of sublime snobbery, and it dazed Lisette. She stared aghast, found nothing fit to reply, turned on her heel and watched the cable rise in the elevator shaft. She saw a yeasty quiver in the crowd and another battle for place began. But the top of the car did not come into view, though the cable stopped. There was a riot of protest among the watchers at the grill; then Lisette saw the cable glide downward again. She sighed.

"He's through with us. We're desoited. It's the other floors' toin."

Priscilla paused a moment.

"Tell me," she said, "is the stairway quite impossible?"

"You can see for yourself," said Lisette.

A black whorl of smoke was streaming up, and enveloping even the throng about the elevator. The group began to break up in short rushes. But one glance at the rotunda was enough, and they fell back.

Priscilla spoke again:

"I've always read that one should get to a window and wait there. Can't we get to a window?"

"We might try through here," said Lisette.

She seized Priscilla's hand and dashed through a door, into a dark stock-room. Along the rafters the smoke was just beginning to thrust its tendrils like a stealthy black ivy. Lisette had been through this room before and she knew the path, though the light was dim.

The girls ran crouching, missing their way in the spaces between the endless bales and boxes. At the end of the passageway they came upon a door.—It was locked. Lisette pounded and called, but there was no answer. She ran back and rammed it with her shoulder, but it did not quiver. She cast about in a rage of impatience and found a chair, swung it high and beat a ragged hole in the panels.

Through this they clambered into another alleyway, aromatic with stored spices. Along this they sped to another door, forced this open and almost fell down a little spiral stairway. They picked their way to the floor beneath.

As Lisette set her hand to a door, it swung open, and there against a background of fierce red she saw her fireman.

"I was lookin' for you, kiddo," was all he said, and began to drag her with him, talking: "I been fightin' my way up to you, but the

other stair was blocked with a pile of women, and I had to stop now and then to keep people from doin' what they shouldn't. I tried some of the hose they got on the racks, but it was so rotten it bust. One of the clerks told me about this way up. I was comin' for you."

XIX

ACROSS THE CRATER

LISETTE was clinging to Priscilla, and, in Indian file, they picked their way through a furnace heat that brought the sweat streaming.

"Have we got a chanst?" Lisette gasped.

"I d' know. Better save your breath. That hot air's like chloroform if you get a whiff of it."

A door of mystery loomed before them with a mantle of smoke about it. They took the plunge, heads down, and lungs aching for breath. They were in a storeroom for toys. Its one window was shut, but there was a door that promised.

No. 37 pushed it open, and fell back before a blast of hot air like a flail. He closed the door, gulped and dropped to one knee; his hands twitched feebly, his head wobbling.

Lisette stared at him, strove to lift him, but he was too heavy. She dashed to the window, hoisted it, and with Priscilla's aid dragged the maundering giant there.

For a moment his head lay inert on the sill; then he opened his eyes wearily, drank deep of the fresher air, and beat himself in the face.

"I was out, I guess," he said, and leaned from the window to survey the prospect.

Below, the street was almost deserted. Across the narrow space flames were leaping at the opposite building, from whose windows here and there streams of water were answering the attack.

The roof of this building was a little higher than the window in the toy room, and several men were frantically beating out the embers that rattled upon it, and sluicing the tin roof with water fetched in buckets.

One man glanced from his task and stared hard at the three faces peering across the red gorge at him. No. 37 howled at him:

"Say, Bo, shove us a plank or a ladder, will you?"

The man called his companions and they cast about stupidly. Then they dragged a ladder from a tank on the roof and shoved it out. It came forward slowly—and the hearts of the three beat with a gladder speed.

Then it stopped coming. The men shook

their heads. It was not long enough. The men stood with their heads bent against the red rain of sparks, pounding them out now and then as they singed coat or hat.

Then one of them turned and darted down the trap-door. He came back after an age of absence, lugging a block and tackle, used for hoisting at some distant time, for the rope was old and dirty. But it was thick.

He stood on the ledge and swung the end across, almost pitching into the street as the iron hook swung free. It fell short, and must be hauled up and cast again. Three times it missed, but then, with a far lunge, No. 37 clutched it, hauled it in and fastened it to an iron stanchion.

Opposite the men were wrapping it around a chimney. No. 37 knew enough not to trust an untested rope. He hung his weight on it, and it held.

"I guess it'll do," he growled.

"It's gotta," said Lisette.

"Come on, 318," said No. 37, throwing off his coat. "Grab holt of my shoulders and hang on like hell."

"Take her foist," said Lisette.

"Not on your life. I came for you. I'll come back for her."

"Take her foist," Lisette said, with that grim look of hers. He put out his arms with a mute appeal that almost overwhelmed her, but she shook her head and repeated: "Take her foist."

He dropped his arms and his head drooped. He mounted the sill, set his feet on the ledge of the window casement beneath, spat on his hands, tested the rope, and nodded to Priscilla Verden. She shook her head and would have persisted if Lisette had not cowed her.

"Your motherdear's waitin' for you. Mine don't know I'm in trouble."

This and her tyrannic glare ended Priscilla's delay. She glanced down into the scarlet depths, and she felt small certainty of the voyage across it. With a sudden impulse she slipped from her wrist a diamond-starred bracelet, caught Lisette's hand and drew it through the gold circlet.

"I may not get across. Will you keep this —to remember me by?"

She clambered upon the sill, and, obeying instructions, wrapped her arms about the fireman's shoulders, one over his left arm, one under his right; and lowered herself.

No. 37 gave Lisette a look of devotion as he called out cheerily:

"Don't you care, kiddo. I'll come back for you. You're a good sport, kiddo, and you've sure made a ten-strike with me."

Then he spat on his hands and let himself down. The rope sagged under the double weight, and the two bodies swung wide. But those big fists held, and those climbing muscles knotted and swelled as hand slipped past hand, slowly but steadily.

As the voyagers reached the middle distance, faces appeared at the upper windows of the opposite building. Two men threw up a sash and leaned out. One of them stood on the ledge with one hand around an awning iron, and the other man clasped his feet.

Inch by inch, No. 37, like another Blondel, crept across the gorge above that red Niagara. And now they reached the point where the progress must be upward, and Lisette, forgetful of herself, panted and ached, feeling in every muscle that mighty effort, and helping it with all her soul.

Twice his forward hand slid back. Lisette saw No. 37 shake his head. She thought it was

with despair, and her heart almost burst in her breast. She could not know that Priscilla had said to him:

"It's too much for you. If I let go, you can make it."

It was at that that he shook his head. He squeezed hard on the little rope with his blistering palms and gained a foot or two.

And then a soaring banner of flame flung up from beneath with a jubilant ecstasy. Lisette fell back to escape it and saw it curl red tentacles about the rope. Just a touch and the rope parted.

A wide sheet of blaze hid what followed. Lisette thought she saw No. 37 and his burden swing crushing against the opposite wall, right against the men at the window. And then her lungs were suddenly filled with a blast—a lethal blast of heat. She sank to the floor.

A few moments later the wall beneath buckled and split and tumbled outward and inward and downward. The watcher with the rope saw Lisette no more, nor the place where she had been. Far below he heard a roaring cataclysm, and saw a mass of ruins battled over by flames and floods.

XX

THE AFTERMATH

THE pitiless facts of that historic fire the newspaper men were compelled to write. Here there is the blessed privilege of omission. Of all that cityful of mourning homes, only one concerns this chronicle.

Mrs. Verden, yielding at last to the suffocation of opiates, had been carried to her home. Her husband, Lancaster Verden, whom millionaires feared, and humbler citizens looked upon as a merciless captain of greed, was using his gigantic mind and money like a giant to find his child.

But he seemed a weeping weakling as he leaned on his secretary and his physician, and ransacked every invoice of the victims, staggered along the mournful aisles, followed every clue his staff could discover, examined every form that was recovered.

Late that evening, the intrepid searchers came upon one smoke-blackened figure under a

steel girder. It needed caution and daring to rescue that body, for the least mishap would bring down a hundred tons of overhanging wreckage.

Under a search-light, the task was accomplished. The body was carried to a line of the dead. And there Lancaster Verden found it in his ever-returning search. He bent above it, stared, gasped, and toppling against a wall, wept like a motherless child.

The secretary knelt quickly, looked up to the surgeon, nodded and whispered:

"This is the bracelet he gave her himself. I was with him when he ordered it made."

The doctor dropped to the ground, and his hands flew to pulse and heart of the silent form.

He gave a startled gasp—then:

"She's not dead—yet."

That doctor had not earned Lancaster Verden's patronage by any prestige save that of knowledge. If there was anything known to his science, he knew it. If there was anything known to him to aid the restoration of life, he tried it that night, first on the street, then in the ambulance, and then in his private hospital.

At about midnight, he was able to say to the madly impatient Verden and his wife, who had

been told of the discovery and the glimmer of hope:

"She'll live. She'll get over the burns in time. She'll be all right."

The old couple fell about each other's necks, as they had done when in the second year of their romance, their daughter, then a new-born babe, had been brought away from the edge of the grave. They laughed and kissed and petted one another. And they hugged the doctor, who tried to look as if he were not as happy as a young graduate gaining his first victory over the everlasting enemy.

In the midst of the rapture, the swaddled form began to quiver and twitch, the head to roll, and the lips to move. And the barely audible words that came were these:

"It hadda come. Now maybe they'll do sumpum. Maybe this'll loin 'em a lesson."

The Verdens and the physician exchanged glances of stupefaction. Such language, even in delirium, bore no hint of Priscilla's speech. Again the thread of voice:

"Gawd knows they needed the lesson. But my fyonsay hadn' oughta been moidered. 'Don'tcha care, kiddo,' he says, 'I'll come back

for you,' he says, and he would 'a' came, if—and I never told him I loved him. He never knew my name."

She was weeping now, softly, feebly, and the others were whispering:

"Who is she? What is she?"

Before the reaction from this new crumbling of hope, the father and mother sank down helpless, with bent heads unsheltered and weary eyes parched for tears.

Upon the gloom of their profound dismay came the whir of a telephone bell. The doctor answered it drearily, then with increasing excitement. He came back glorious with news:

"Priscilla's all right," he said. "She was carried out of the building by a fireman and they were both stunned by a crash against the opposite wall, but they were pulled in at a window. They were taken care of in the building opposite and then shipped off to Bellevue Hospital. The force is so overworked that they neglected to let you know. And when they called up your house, there was some misunderstanding."

"Where is she? My baby; where is she? We must go to her at once!"

"She and the fireman are at Bellevue."

Father and mother were so frantic to be gone that they trod on each other's toes. They were at the door when Mrs. Verden remembered to be Mrs. Verden. She came back and said to the mysterious stranger:

"This poor child, we mustn't forget her. Is there anything on earth we can do for you, my dear?"

From the bandages came forth a slow, halting whisper in which pain was merged with strange sense of content:

"If it ain't astin' too much, Mrs. Voiden, you could send a messitch to Mrs. Dennis Mooney, nummer Two-Oh-Fi' West a Hunnerd and Forty-Se'mth Street—got that?—and tell her her daughter Lisette is all right—considerin' that the Mammoth Store has fell on her. And you might get woid to that fireman—nummer Thoity Se'm, he is—got that?—tell him kiddo sends him her—well, say, listen! Whyn't you just ship me over to Bellavue? Then I could tell him m'self and I wouldn't be distoibin' ever'body s'much!"

 Printed in the United States of America